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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 002317

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SUBJECT: RUSSIA-SOUTH OSSETIA SITREP AUGUST

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Alice G. Wells. Reasons  
1.4(b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary. The MFA claims Russia's principal goal in taking military action in South Ossetia is to stop the bloodshed. Blaming the current crisis on Georgia, alluding to (but not confirming) the dispatch of Russian military to South Ossetia, accusing Tbilisi of "ethnic cleansing" in South Ossetian villages, and insisting Russia must protect its citizens, wherever they are, the GOR maintained its actions were necessary to prevent more violence. They denied knowledge of any volunteers going to the region, and said DFM Karasin had urged Abkhaz leader Bagapsh to show restraint about sending Abkhaz troops to join South Ossetian fighters. President Medvedev issued a statement following an emergency meeting of the security council saying Russia would not allow the deaths of its citizens to go unpunished, a statement the MFA downplayed. EU colleagues reiterated our message of restraint, disengagement, and a return to the political process, with little effect. With Putin setting a hard line, and a chorus of high level officials denouncing Georgian actions, Medvedev has been thrust into the limelight, with most experts concluding that any appearance of weakness will be politically fatal. End summary.

MFA: Russia's Top Priority to Stop the Bloodshed  
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2. (C) In an August 8 meeting, MFA 4th CIS Deputy Director Semyon Grigoriev told us Karasin had spoken twice to DFM Vashadze on August 7. He had urged Georgia to stop hostilities, saying the GOG should put aside the question of who started the provocations. But despite all of the messages from the U.S., UN, NATO, etc., the Georgians had continued their military operations. Russia agreed that military action would not solve the conflict in South Ossetia, but Russia's immediate task was to stop the bloodshed, and Russian actions needed to be understood in this context. Grigoriev said the MFA did not have full information on Russian military movements, but referred to reports that Russian troops had entered South Ossetia and were moving toward Tskhinvali, with Russian aviation controlling South Ossetian airspace (note: the MOD later confirmed in a statement that Russian tanks had moved into South Ossetia). If this "forced measure" stopped the bloodshed, then it was good, Grigoriev said. Afterwards, the international community could meet in many formats (UN, OSCE, etc.) and assess the situation, but now Russia's "measure" was necessary. Russia would continue discussing the issue with the U.S. and Europe, and if the situation calmed down in the near future, it would not be necessary to keep the additional Russian forces in the area.

3. (C) In response to our message of de-escalation and strong

expression of concern over the MFA's implicit recognition of Russian violation of Georgian territorial integrity, Grigoriev characterized Georgia's actions as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing." Grigoriev told us Russia's first task, as President Medvedev had said, was to defend Russian citizens, "wherever they are." The second priority was to return Georgian forces to where they had been prior to the recent actions. Grigoriev stressed that Russia's decision-making was continuing, and it was too soon to predict what its priorities would be tomorrow or next week. The problem, he said, was that the recent developments had "changed the situation drastically." It was difficult to say when negotiations would restart or in what format, but it would be very difficult to go back to the situation of a month ago, since there had been a lot of blood shed since then.

¶4. (C) In response to A/DCM's expression of concern over Medvedev's statement about needing to "punish" those responsible for the deaths of Russian citizens, Grigoriev urged us to view the term "punish" in its juridical sense, noting that Medvedev was a lawyer. He said we needed to understand that South Ossetia was not a "foreign policy" issue for Russia. South Ossetia and Georgia were part of the "greater Caucasus," some of which was the Russian Caucasus. Medvedev had to take into account the feelings of the people of the area, and indeed of all Russians. Grigoriev did not react to our statement that Russia had committed itself to respecting Georgian territorial integrity.

¶5. (C) A/DCM urged Russia to undertake measures to prevent volunteers from entering South Ossetia from Russia or from Abkhazia. Grigoriev said the MFA had no information on volunteers beyond what the media was reporting, but said Karasin had done his best to persuade Abkhaz leader Bagapsh to show restraint after Bagapsh had called Karasin to tell him Abkhaz troops were ready to move. He also told us South Ossetian leader Kokoity had met North Ossetian president Mamsurov in Tskhinvali, but he was not aware of any contacts between the leadership in Moscow and North Ossetian officials. Russian special envoy Popov had returned to Tbilisi and would remain there under instructions from the FM.

¶6. (C) Grigoriev downplayed prospects that DFM Vashadze would still travel to Moscow August 10; while Karasin had not canceled the session, he had not reconfirmed it.

Medvedev: Russia Will Protect its Citizens  
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¶7. (SBU) After an inconclusive morning security session held by Medvedev, the President called an emergency meeting of the Russian security council in the afternoon, after which he issued a statement saying that Russia had been present on the territory of Georgia on fully legal grounds as it fulfilled its peacekeeping mission in accordance with international agreements. In comments more in keeping with those uttered by Putin in Beijing, Medvedev asserted that Russia historically was and remained the guarantor of security for the people in the Caucasus. He said the Georgian military had committed an act of aggression against Russian peacekeepers and peaceful residents. The actions of the Georgian side had led to casualties, including among the Russian peacekeepers. Innocent men, women and children were dying in South Ossetia, the majority of whom were Russian citizens. Medvedev continued that it was his duty as Russian president to safeguard the lives and dignity of Russian citizens, wherever they were, which was the logic behind the steps Russia was taking. Russia would not allow the deaths of its citizens to go unpunished. Those guilty would receive due punishment.

FM Lavrov Accuses Georgia of Ethnic Cleansing  
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¶8. (U) FM Lavrov issued a statement late August 8 saying Georgia's actions "call into question its maturity as a state and a responsible member of the international community." He accused Georgian peacekeepers acting within the joint

peacekeeping forces of firing at their Russian counterparts. He said Georgia was using force against its own people, and claimed there was evidence of "ethnic cleansing in South Ossetian villages." (Russian media has focused attention on reports of widespread civilian casualties in Tskhinvali, citing over a thousand dead).

¶9. (U) Earlier in the day, the Russian MFA posted a statement accusing Georgia of a "treacherous" assault on Tskhinvali, saying the GOG was opting for a military solution to the frozen conflict, regardless of the diplomatic efforts that were in the works between Moscow, Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, Washington, and others. The MFA concluded that Georgia had been completely discredited as a responsible negotiating partner and it was clear why Georgia had refused to sign a non-use of force pledge. The statement said it was not too late to prevent "massive bloodshed" and new casualties, particularly among the civilian population, with the MFA expressing concern over the fate of Russia peacekeepers. MFA urged Georgia to return to a "civilized path," and said foreign partners should not remain non-participants. Russia urged joint action to halt the violence which was fraught with the most serious consequences for regional and international security. Russia would continue its efforts to halt further bloodshed and to return South Ossetia to a peaceful course.

#### PM Putin, Government Officials, Denounce Georgian Actions

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¶10. (U) PM Putin, from China, was the first senior GOR official to characterize the night's events, expressing regret at Georgian "aggressive actions," and calling for actions within the CIS to halt Georgian military operations. He said there were lots of volunteers in the region and it was very hard to "withhold them from taking part." "A real war is going on," he said. Duma Speaker Gryzlov said Russia would take all necessary measures to protect its citizens in South Ossetia, and would continue its "patient" search for a solution to the conflict. Gryzlov blamed Georgia for resorting to military action, at a time when the international community was trying to find a diplomatic solution. Duma International Relations Chairman Konstantin Kosachev said Georgia would be left internationally isolated, and called upon the EU and U.S. to change its policy toward Tbilisi. North Ossetian President Mamsurov announced that a convoy of "humanitarian assistance" had been bombed by the GOG.

¶11. (U) In a press conference, Russian presidential envoy for South Ossetia Dmitriy Medoyev focused on civilian casualties and other damage inflicted by attacks from Georgia. He decried Georgia's use of multiple-launch missile systems against the civilian population. He said South Ossetian authorities had prevented thousands of civilians being killed by evacuating residents of villages likely to come under Georgian fire. He claimed five South Ossetian settlements had been wiped out along the border with Georgia. He accused the Georgian leadership of using "scorched earth" tactics and "seeking an ethnic cleansing" of South Ossetia. He praised Abkhazia's decision to send volunteers to South Ossetia. He said he expected Russia to increase its peacekeeping contingent, noting that the mandate permitted such an increase.

#### Georgian Embassy Says No Contact with MFA

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¶12. (C) The Georgian Charge told us he had had no contact with the MFA today. He said it was unclear if DFM Vashadze's visit to Moscow on Sunday, August 10, would proceed.

#### Other Embassies, Russian Experts Comment

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¶13. (C) The EU Commission, along with the French Embassy met with the MFA Acting Director for CIS Affairs who argued that Russia and the international community had been betrayed by

Saakashvili's assaults, and reiterated the GOR public lines. The UK was considering a call by the Political Director to Karasin. The MFA told the Germans that the only question was whether Georgia would consolidate its control over Tskhinvali today. The MFA warned, however, that violence and instability in the region would spread, with a return to the "1991 scenario."

¶14. (C) Russian political observers said Georgia's effort to "return to the constitutional order" was proof that Georgia was intent on a military solution to end the frozen conflict in South Ossetia now. They said it would be difficult for Georgia to prove that it had not been the aggressor, and stressed that Russia would likely use this to try to show the West that the Georgian leadership, particularly Saakashvili, was not reasonable. Fedor Lukyanov, Editor of Russia in Global Affairs, said Georgia had clearly decided to solve its territorial problem by force, and believed it had a win-win situation: Georgia would either succeed in taking South Ossetia, or Russia would get involved in war with Georgia, and the West would have no choice but to support Georgia. In either event, politically, Russia could not sit by; it would need to intervene militarily because most of the people were Russian citizens, regardless of how they got their citizenship. It was also clear that North Ossetia would support South Ossetia and volunteers would flow in.

¶15. (C) Some experts believed that Russia wanted to keep South Ossetia and Abkhazia unstable so as to prevent Georgia from receiving a NATO Membership Action Plan in December, but they did not think Russia wanted a full-scale war. Ivan Safranchuk of the World Security Institute posited that Saakashvili was serious about winning back South Ossetia and wanted to strike now so that the military situation could calm down prior to the December NATO summit. He could show the West that Russia was not a threat, and undercut his domestic opponents who had criticized him for not taking more decisive action to win back the break-away regions. Safranchuk added Saakashvili had to make a choice: he could either push for NATO MAP and surrender away the break-away regions, or he could move quickly while a MAP offer was still pending and have a free hand to strike.

¶16. (C) Several experts also criticized the West for providing weapons and military equipment to Georgia (reinforcing the difficult optic of the U.S. support for the return of Georgian troops from Iraq). Anatoliy Tsyganok, Director of the Center for Military Prognosis, told us that Eastern European NATO members, in particular Poland, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria, were providing Saakashvili military technology. He contended the U.S. was to blame for allowing Georgia to make such an egregious mistake, and for providing military assistance (i.e. helicopters) to Tbilisi.

#### Refugees/Internally Displaced Persons

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¶17. (C) UNHCR told us that as of Thursday, August 7, approximately 2,000 civilians, mostly women and children, had entered North Ossetia and remained. They expected more to arrive today.

#### Putin-Medvedev Dynamic

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¶18. (C) This is Medvedev's first major foreign policy challenge, and many commentators believe it will be decisive in determining his ability to successfully occupy the Kremlin seat vacated by Putin. With Putin in Beijing, but setting a stiff tone, Medvedev is thrust center stage. While some commentators say Russia's reaction to the crisis in South Ossetia shows that Putin's more hawk-like followers continue to make the decisions on critical issues, most reinforce the foreign policy consensus here that Georgia cannot get away with a military solution to the South Ossetian conflict. The consensus is that Medvedev cannot appear weak or indecisive in the face of an assault on Russia's South Ossetian "citizens."

